

Queering Anna Karenina: Reimagining Tolstoy for the Twenty-First Century

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

"Happy families are all alike. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." These famous opening sentences of Leo Tolstoy's masterpiece novel *Anna Karenina* serve as an axis around which the rest of the novel's plot, characters, and motifs all revolve. The book delves into themes of adultery, society, art, philosophy, and even agriculture, but all these subordinate conversations circle back to the questions posited by the novel's first lines: what are happy families and unhappy families, and how do these families relate to each other? My thesis, part creative project and part analytical project, seeks to speak back against Tolstoy's idea of the monolithic happy family by offering a queer, postmodern retelling of *Anna Karenina* where environmental degradation affects families' fertility and where Anna and Vronsky are two women who must navigate their way through the complex and often painful societal expectations of rural Indiana.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Wolfe for helping me complete this long quest. Dr. Wolfe's Gender and Literature course provided me with frameworks of feminist literary theory—like ecofeminism and Julia Kristeva's abjection—that I have continued to use throughout my undergraduate career and that I have used in this very thesis. For having only had Dr. Wolfe in one semester of regular classes, her presence in my academic life has been profound and transformative.

Along those lines, I would like to thank all of the faculty of Ball State's English department for teaching me the skills I needed to approach literature critically and empathetically; in particular, I would like to thank Dr. Joyce Huff, Dr. Adam Beach, and Dr. Vanessa Rapatz, all of whom served as faculty advisors during my time in BSU English's *Digital Literature Review* and all of whom have shown confidence in me while also showing me ways in which to have confidence in myself.

I also would like to extend special gratitude to Dr. Caitlin Murray in the anthropology department for challenging me to interrogate my culture, which has kick-started much of my personal development. She also served as a springboard for many of the ideas for this thesis.

Last, but truly not least, I would like to thank my friends, my family, and the Ball State Honors College—all of which are intimately intertwined. In particular, I want to thank Professor Beth Dalton and Dr. Jason Powell for their emotional and intellectual support. I want to thank the Heim, Duff, and Korff families for all the love (and for forever giving me something interesting to write about). And, of course, I want to thank my Bitches™.

This mysterious and achingly sublime God I will thank not with words but with my life, which could express only a breath of all that is contained on the nearest edges of infinity.

Process Analysis

My current thesis looks nothing at all like my first idea for my senior honors thesis. So far as I can remember, I started out thinking that I'd like to study Madeleine L'Engle's works in some capacity, as I was and still am completely enamored by her Time Quintet series, the first of which is her famous Newbery winner *A Wrinkle in Time*. Around that time, however, I began to revisit *Anna Karenina*, which I had read in high school; I hadn't even really liked *Anna Karenina* the first time I'd gone through it, but my more mature college palate found the characters, the setting, and most of the plot to be charming and familiar, and coming back to the book helped to give me much needed release from my academic and emotional stress. And Tolstoy's prose is always impeccable, particularly when translated by such eloquent scholars as Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear. Thinking about *Anna Karenina* and about my relationship to it, I decided that, despite my continued passion for Madeleine L'Engle and her work, I wanted to take on the challenge of using *Anna Karenina* for my senior thesis. There was such a depth to Tolstoy's characters, his world, and his thought that I was unable to resist taking a closer look.

At first, I definitely imagined that my approach to Tolstoy's novel would end up as a literary analysis, as most of my work throughout my bachelor's degree program manifested itself in literary analyses. I tossed a few ideas back and forth for a while. When I discovered that many people considered Tolstoy to be a misogynist, I immediately felt my calling as a Tolstoy fan girl to jump to his defense with a scathing and vindicating thesis about all of his perfect qualities; I've since realized that Tolstoy had his problems, like every author. Disappointed in my mission to prove Tolstoy blameless, I also thought that approaching the novel from an ecofeminist analytical lens (thinking about the death of Anna as the death of the Russian land itself) would yield exciting fruit, and it was in the context of using ecofeminism in my thesis that I asked Dr.

Wolfe for her assistance as my thesis advisor; she had first introduced me to the theory in her Gender and Literature class, so this choice only made sense.

So, for a long while, I devoted time in the pursuit of my ecofeminist analysis of *Anna Karenina*; I even had a cute working thesis title for a hot second, which included a terrible pun about feminism being “on track” in Tolstoy’s novel. (It’s terrible because Anna died on train tracks.) However, around winter break of my senior year, I came to the realization that I didn’t have to do a literary analysis for my thesis: I could use this as an opportunity to explore skills I didn’t develop as much in my literature classes. The epiphany had arrived, and I realized that I wanted to try my hand at a creative project.

Because I’d already had so much time and effort invested into a project with *Anna Karenina*, I still wanted to work with that particular text. I was fortunate to remember an idea for a creative project that I’d invented some time before winter break, an idea that revolved around one simple question: how would the story of *Anna Karenina* be different if Vronsky were a woman instead of a man?

From that, my thought experiments about a queer, postmodern retelling of Tolstoy’s novel burgeoned into my current thesis. I had originally intended for my thesis to have about 20 pages of creative work and 20 pages of analytical work, but this goal did not end up being accomplished due to a few complications. For one, I came to understand throughout my research that *Anna Karenina* is actually an incredibly expansive and difficult work; whenever I thought I had a good analytical grip on the novel’s meaning, I would read another article that forced me to reconfigure my entire conception of it, and it honestly intimidated me immensely. In a way, I was glad that I didn’t end up trying to do a literary analysis on the work. On top of all the other projects I had in my literature classes, this would have been ridiculously hard to manage.

Because of this, my analytical portion only ended up being about 10 pages long, and it essentially served to provide important context for the work as well as justifying my artistic decisions.

I also tripped up on a part of my creative portion as well. I knew for a fact that I wanted to write enough prose to give readers a sense of the type of novel it would be, but I had also intended a novel outline and character list to be part of my thesis. This did not end up happening due to both time and space restraints. I realized quickly that I would rather use the 20 pages that I'd given for the creative purposes for exclusively prose, and so I nixed the more in-depth outline and character list in favor of explaining those details broadly in my analytic portion. This wasn't ideal, but honestly, my creative writing process normally doesn't include detailed outlines or character arch; of all the books I've written (and I've written a couple), I've never managed to do an outline or character lists, as much as I've tried to. I don't think my writing has suffered because of this, though I could be wrong. I've always approached the first drafts of my novels with the hopes that increased opportunity for flexibility would allow me to take risks on wild inspiration, and I've seen examples in my own writing where that has paid off.

My third goal has dissolved into much larger disappointment, however. My first aspiration for this thesis was to learn how to better manage my time, and I thought that, having done multiple research projects for my literature classes, I was finally equipped to approach a longer project with a better sense of how to use my time wisely. To be completely honest, this did not end up happening. I changed the direction of my thesis the winter break before graduation, and it ended up rendering much of my previous research useless. When I did start doing the relevant research this spring semester, I let myself get overwhelmed. Dr. Wolfe asked

me to submit a research schedule, and I did, but I had a horrible time sticking to it. I merely had to modify my other two goals; this one I completely failed to achieve.

It would be unfair to give myself no mercy on this point, however. This spring semester has easily been the strangest time emotionally since fall of my freshman year. I won't go into intimate detail, because this is a professional space, but suffice it to say that the turmoil in my personal life robbed me of my center and of my emotional energy. As someone who has always depended on her center and her emotional energy when completing intense tasks, this was devastating. My thesis was not the only place where my academics slipped, unfortunately. Nothing happened so much as to noticeably lower my grades, but I had a serious lack of passion about almost all of my classes and projects; for someone who has always invested so much worth in academics, this was shocking and disappointing for me.

Because of this, the actual process of writing my thesis was much more haphazard than I would have liked. I didn't take the initiative to get ahold of Dr. Wolfe very often, even though she was always more than willing to help me if I had questions. I fell out of schedule with my research. I procrastinated more than I would like to admit, and the more and more I procrastinated, the more and more I felt as if my thesis were going to be horrible.

Despite this, I still have a reasonable degree of pride in my work. I'm examining an important subject; even if my work isn't perfect, it can still do a good amount of service in the world. Too often I allow myself to be deterred by visions of perfection. I think that this project, if allowed more work and dedication, would not ever be perfect, but could perhaps move into a cultural space where its characters can speak, where its plots can be seen, and where its project can touch communities in order to facilitate lasting and nuanced understandings about what family means in America and about who should be allowed into ideas of domesticity.

So, yes, there are ways in which my thesis was a mess. But there were also ways in which my thesis experience has helped to broaden how I think and approach my literature education. I've always loved creative writing, and I've always loved literary analysis, and this project has given me the opportunity to integrate those passions. This helps to reassure the voice in the back of my head that irrationally berates me for studying English instead of something more imminently applicable. If I'm able to bend and use my literature skills in pursuit of a project like this, what is to keep me from applying those same skills to different projects?

Or, in fact, the same project. I fully plan on finishing this book project at a later date. Now that I have done the work of thinking up ways in which to accurately yet uniquely display Tolstoy's characters, of imagining how those characters interact with a setting vastly different than Tolstoy's, and then finally of integrating Tolstoy's vision with my own, I feel inclined to think that this project has some future beyond just the folder of abandoned novel ideas. I think that there's much to get excited about in a project like this. Being able to connect grand stories like that of *Anna Karenina* to contemporary and familiar places and people demonstrates the universality of such experiences. And being able to modify those grand stories just enough so that they speak better to our particular cultural moment yet still maintain the emotional gravitas of the original is immensely satisfying.

I'm attending Ball State for a master's program in literature this fall, so this thesis has been fantastic practice to prepare for that. I've learned a lot about what not to do when developing and executing research plans, so hopefully I will be able to avoid those pitfalls when feeling out my master's thesis. However, I've also learned the importance of creativity, flexibility, and communication in regards to research plans as well. I am excited for the future of my research and the future of my thesis work.

Analytical Work

"Happy families are all alike. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." (Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* 1) These famous opening sentences of Leo Tolstoy's masterpiece novel *Anna Karenina* serve as an axis around which the rest of the novel's plot, characters, and motifs revolve. The book delves into themes of adultery, society, art, philosophy, and even agriculture, but all these subordinate conversations circle back to the questions posited by the novel's first lines: what are happy families and unhappy families, and how do these families relate to each other?

This is the question that my thesis—a queer, postmodern rewriting of Tolstoy's novel—seeks to investigate. More than that, my novel attempts to critically analyze the ideas of family that permeate current American society, with a special emphasis on how those ideas of family affect queer individuals and how conceptions of family are themselves affected by current environmental policies.

Literary and Cultural Context

When Tolstoy penned these words in the late nineteenth century, the families he wrote about contained, on the whole, rich aristocrats of imperial Russia, living in a world of elegant balls, decadent clothing, operas, and country estates with farm workers. On the surface, the aesthetic of Tolstoy's Russia does not betray the intense social change occurring at the time—politically, socially, and technologically.

Tolstoy's family politics, off of which he based *Anna Karenina*'s famous opening line, were a conservative bastion amongst this change. In his essay "To Women," Tolstoy outlines—under the pretext of empowering women in the context of natural law—a rigid view of family life that designates all true and pure women to the role of mother, saying, "[w]omen of the

wealthy classes who are mothers, the salvation of the men of our world from the evils from which they are suffering, lies in your hands” (“To Women”). Later, shockingly, Tolstoy would advocate “a rejection of all sexuality and sexual politics, not just female sexuality,” turning his back on the idea of “Christian marriage that is sexually consummated” and insisting that “[s]ex cannot be justified at all, even by procreation” (Mandelker 29). Despite this change of opinion on Tolstoy’s part, a heavy accusation of misogyny hangs over Tolstoy’s legacy; and perhaps this is understandable, as it is of no small importance that Tolstoy’s two most popular literary works—*War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878)—were written before he had converted to the “antimariage, antifamily position” expressed by his *Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) (Mandelker 28). It is perhaps also important, in thinking about the concept of Tolstoy’s misogyny, to remember that in *War and Peace*, Tolstoy pigeonholes the main female character, Natasha Rostova, into a domestic role after she has sought excitement with the dashing and dangerous Anatole Kuragin; and in *Anna Karenina*, the titular female character commits suicide by train after having broken Tolstoy’s family rules. It is no wonder that Tolstoy faces some rightfully-deserved feminist criticism.

There are scholars hashing out the accusations of Tolstoy’s misogyny; Amy Mandelker, with her book *Framing Anna Karenina* (1993), is an important example of the work working toward these ends. This thesis does not particularly aspire to speak back against Tolstoy’s many opinions on women; not only has a multitude of experienced thinkers already toiled over this mission, but it is also nearly impossible work to do in the context of a creative novel, as Tolstoy’s views changed drastically throughout his lifetime. Rather, in the scope of Tolstoyan criticism, my novel strives to speak back against the particular vision of family represented by *Anna Karenina*, where all happy families are alike; in the scope of cultural criticism, my novel

considers how the bare bones plot of *Anna Karenina*—that story of the haunted adulteress and her ultimate death beneath a train—can be reimagined to reflect the complexities that issues of sexuality and environment create in the modern American family.

While Tolstoyan criticism always sweeps me off my feet, the importance of my project resides in its ability to bear witness to the complexity of modern familial relationships.. In America, all happy families are not alike. This is a proven fact. According to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center, nontraditional forms of families—single parents, remarried parents, cohabitating parents—have usurped the traditional nuclear family’s throne for a combined majority, leading the center to declare that “there is no longer one dominant family form in the U.S.” (“Parenting in America” 15). The center cites drops in fertility, extramarital births, and the migration of women into the workforce as primary causes for this change in family structure.

Interestingly enough, the 2015 Pew Research Center says nothing about households where members of the LGBTQ+ community cohabitate, live as a married couple, live single, act as parents, or any combination thereof. I say that this is interesting because the nationwide ruling to legalize gay marriage occurred in June of 2015, resolving “more than a decade of bitter legal battles” that surely must have been on the public’s mind when the Pew Research Center conducted their report about families (“US Supreme Court”). However, the Pew Research Center has issued smaller studies about acceptance of homosexual marriage—a majority of 62% of Americans supported it in 2017 (Gao)—and of homosexual children—57% of parents wouldn’t be upset if a child came out as queer in 2015 (“Most Americans”)— which indicates a positive trend toward acceptance in the American public. In Indiana, the state that serves as the setting for my novel, homosexual couples are allowed to jointly adopt children and someone in a same-sex relationship is permitted to adopt the child of their partner. (“LGBT Adoption Laws”).

Change is being made. And continuing that change is the intention of my novel. As a literature student, I've always believed in the ability of a strong story to make waves in its world, and I particularly believe that the story of *Anna Karenina* is ideally primed to facilitate this change. While the novel has been considered many different things by many different people, I have always perceived the story as one that demonstrates the unequal judgment of society upon a person who has done nothing more or less than be human. The essential plot points of *Anna Karenina*, then, lend themselves marvelously to a queer rewrite to examine the discrimination that still occurs toward queer people in 2019.

I'm not inclined to think that my opinion of the story was Tolstoy's original intention in writing the novel—the epigraph of the book, Deuteronomy 32:35, suggests that Anna's suicide was more a result of justice than injustice—but this doesn't bother a postmodern reinterpretation. The irreverent zeitgeist of the postmodern does not demand that I treat any of the origins of my art with full devotion to its meaning; it does not even demand that I treat my origins with respect. However, my love of Tolstoy prevents me from slurring his work too much, and while I believe that Tolstoy is probably rolling in his grave over this project, I hope to manage his original work in respectful and thought-provoking ways

Creative Vision

In telling my queer, postmodern *Anna Karenina*, I've made multiple adjustments to the original novel in order to help the story speak to the cultural context that I know best—rural Indiana.

While in some ways rural Indiana is not an obvious setting for a story like *Anna Karenina*, in some ways the setting is strangely analogous to that of the original. Having grown

up in rural Indiana, I speak from first-hand experience when I say that everyone knows everyone else in ways similar, I believe, to the intimacy of Tolstoy's society. Furthermore, the setting of rural Indiana pays homage to the concerns that Tolstoy expressed over agriculture's role in society, as both American mythos and Tolstoy idealize the small farming community, where people are said to live in pure connection to the earth and to each other; obviously, rural communities have their own problems (not the least of which is inadequate access to economic opportunity and healthcare), and setting *Anna Karenina* in a rural community allows me to use my intimate knowledge of the area to interrogate some of these idyllic fantasies of country life. In particular relation to my queer rewrite, this rural lifestyle, despite the huge steps made in LGBTQ+ rights, still has difficulty accommodating and accepting people who stand outside of the white, Protestant, patriarchal, heteronormative paradigm.

My penchant for ecocriticism is another reason that I chose the setting of rural Indiana. A lot of the politics that I've overheard in relation to my rural Indiana hometown revolve around issues like renewable energies, ecologically responsible farming techniques, hunting rights, and environmental stewardship. Rural Indiana in many ways is ground zero for a lot of insecurities about our modern way of living. I grew up in a house with well water, and it wasn't until I took an environmental science class that I realized, given the amount of pesticides and herbicides used on the fields in the area, that I should definitely encourage my parents to double-check the pollution levels of their well.

My intimate knowledge of rural Indiana's environmental politics gives me the opportunity to imitate Tolstoy's tendency of loading his novels with almost-heavy-handed political discussions; however, I think that the environmental politics surrounding rural Indiana communities also serves as the basis for my novel in many respects. Jericho, Indiana (one of the

small towns in my novel, based upon my actual hometown of Carthage, Indiana), is the location of a well-established pesticide plant, and Alexis Vronskaya, a medical anthropology PhD student, comes in to do ethnographic research on an industrial accident that happened at the plant back in the 1960s. This industrial accident poisoned some of the water supply in Jericho with pesticide, which has led to major fertility issues for individuals living in a certain radius around the accident's epicenter. Ann Ennaugh, my stand in for Anna Karenina, grew up in the affected area, and she's had a very difficult time with miscarriages because of it. What's more, Jerichoians are afraid to make a stink about the effects of the accident because the pesticide plant is the only major employer in the area, and getting on the bad side of the company means losing what little job opportunity there is in the town.

Ann's fertility issues are a major point of tension in her marriage, as she feels that her husband, Alex, became severely withdrawn after her multiple miscarriages; she knows that this is a coping method for him, but because of his distance she feels wholly unsupported in her own trauma and grief, something that she continues to experience even after she has given birth to her son, Scott. It's this trauma and grief that first allows for an intimate emotional connection between Ann and Alexis, as the issue of Ann's fertility comes up in an ethnographic interview that Alexis conducts with Ann for her PhD dissertation.

The pesticide contamination also serves as the foundation for my handling of *Anna Karenina's* famous train motif. In Tolstoy, the train has symbolic import for just about every aspect of the novel: it's been cited as representing the frivolity and excess of the Russian upper classes, but this, like almost every attempt at finding some conclusive meaning by sifting through the plurality of implication in Tolstoy, is hard to prove beyond a shade of doubt (Jahn 3). The interpretation of Tolstoy's train motif that I personally subscribe to maintains that the train is

representative of Tolstoy's fears about the forward-thinking innovations subsuming his preferred traditional, agricultural style of living; in this framework, the death of Anna becomes a commentary about how womanhood (and, more broadly, traditional Russian values) was expected to die beneath what Tolstoy thought were the politics and moralities of the future.

The train of my novel serves the opposite symbolic purpose: rather than representing a destructive future, my train represents a lingering, poisonous past. The train outside of Jericho (which also runs past Braxtonville, the larger town in which Ann lives with Alex) does not carry people but rather only serves to carry chemicals to and from Jericho's pesticide plant. Its service to the town of Jericho is only nominally service, as its provision of jobs (and, by extent, worth and meaning) for the town is vastly overshadowed by the insidious pollution that it facilitates.

This opposite approach to the train motif allows me to approach the death of my Anna character differently; this is perhaps the most crucial point of my novel, and the one I know will need the gentlest handling. Due to the overwhelming statistics of poor mental health in the LGBTQ+ community, I will have to be very careful about my lesbian Anna's suicide. The trope of gay suicide and death is indicative of mainstream media's desire to narratively erase queer people, and it creates a cloud of distress and hopelessness for queer people who constantly see this narrative replayed.

Being every mindful of this, I have decided to reframe the rationale of Ann's death, and I have allowed it to play a much larger role in the plot than Tolstoy did. When Anna Karenina died beneath the train, the event's impact is narrow and limited: the plot that occurs afterward shows most of the Russian aristocrats just settling into their normal patterns after the tragedy. The broader Russian society of which Anna was a part is not shown to be overly affected by her

death, and most of the gravitas of the last part of the book comes from the alternate plot line of Levin settling into a way of coping with his existential dread.

I think that Tolstoy made this decision to illuminate the severe sense of coldness and detachment that was pervasive in the Russian society in which he wrote, and in this context the technique is successful. However, I do not have so much faith in the coldness and detachment of the rural Indiana society in which I write, and the death of my novel's Anna is not going to be met with such a passionless response. Ann's death, perceived as a suicide by the people in Braxtonville and Jericho, becomes the catalyst for change in her community: her end by the pesticide company's train opens up an investigation into the pesticide plant, where government officials discover the continued mismanagement of hazardous chemicals and must shut it down; Jericho, faced with the loss of their only major employer, finally votes (after years of fierce opposition) to allow a major solar-power company to set up facilities outside of town; Ann's husband, a deacon of nearby New Life Baptist, begins a conversation about accepting homosexuality in their church; Alexis finishes her PhD and devotes herself to LGBTQ+ advocacy in rural areas; and Kitty, reimagined as a closeted lesbian who has reluctantly submitted to a marriage with my novel's Levin character, decides to run away from Jericho in the middle of the night, called toward a future in which she can actually find happiness.

All of this is facilitated by Ann. That in and of itself is an important step toward doing justice to a death that might otherwise seem distasteful. To further illustrate the heroic nature of Ann's death, I intend to make it more of an accident than a suicide, and I envision the accident itself as something nobler than a mere drunken stumble onto the train tracks. The pushing point for Ann is contingent on two events: 1) Alexis informs her that, through careful sleuthing, she's discovered that the pesticide plant is still mismanaging their chemicals and is continuing to

poison the Jericho water; and 2) Ann and Alexis have an argument about moving to the city where they can escape both the polluted water and the scathing criticism inherent to living in Jericho and Braxtonville, one that ends in Alexis stomping off and leaving for Bloomington in the middle of the night. After the argument, Ann, distraught, begins to drink and runs outside in a fit of panic. Hours pass, and Ann continues to drink, until she comes to the train tracks, where she hears the train in the distance. Disoriented and impaired, Ann can only think that the train is bringing poison to Jericho and that it is the reason that Alexis left her. She steps onto the tracks believing that she will stop the incoming engine if she tries hard enough, and her last thoughts are ecstasies about how she is saving her town and her life with Alexis in one fell swoop.

In a broad stroke, my creative vision for this rewrite of *Anna Karenina* approaches family from an ecocritical standpoint that explores the many ways in which ideas of family are complicated in the society of rural Indiana: not only is the family affected by new gender and sexuality politics, but it is also affected by environmental issues, and my project seeks to make clear delineations between those forces. And, ultimately, my project endorses the belief that, in some sense, the turbulence that the idea of the American family is currently experiencing can be overcome if individuals rework their definitions of family and allows themselves flexibility to make choices that, while perhaps betraying a rigidly traditional structure, will ultimately benefit society.

This is a postmodern text, so there are moments of levity, too. It has been an exciting exercise of the mind to think of activities in rural Indiana that are analogous to Russian balls and horse racing (river floating and midget racing at the county fair, respectively). I've done some typically postmodern tongue-in-cheek work, too: Ann (who's name is Anna on her birth certificate) has the middle name of Karen, making her full name literally "Anna Karen

Ennaugh;” Alexis Vronskaya loves *War and Peace*; and when Ann goes to comfort Doll Oberlin after catching Steve cheating, they make Moscow mules. I’m sure that as I continue to write, I’ll find more ways to make little jokes in reference to Tolstoy’s original texts, and I won’t lie: I’m looking forward to making the cringiest connections possible.

Is Tolstoy rolling in his grave? Yes. But I’m of the inclination that every great thinker deserves to roll around at least once in a while. *Anna Karenina*’s wide popularity and importance in world literature makes it especially worthy of some irreverent postmodern fun. More than this, though, I think that my novel also has the potential to create crucial conversation about what family means and about how the many facets of life in America affect that meaning. Having already performed much of the important thought work for the novel, I fully intend to complete this work at a later date. I’m certain that Tolstoy would not be overly proud of me, but there’s a sense in which that makes me proud of myself.

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Creative Work



No, I think the only difference between happy and unhappy families is that unhappy ones are a lot more fun to talk about.

Take that old story about the Oberlins, for instance. When it came out one spring Saturday that Steve Oberlin had been doing the horizontal tango with his boy's pretty schoolteacher over at Jericho Elementary, it didn't take much more than an afternoon for the news to get as far as Indianapolis. It's like a hencoop, Braxton County; we've got nothing better to do then cluck around and go shitting everywhere we get the chance. Ann, bless her heart, she probably knew about the whole thing before noon, that's as long as it would have taken people to blab their way to Braxtonville; that morning at 8 am, Doll Oberlin throws Steve out onto the front lawn with a suitcase, and by 12 pm noon Ann probably heard the about the entire thing as she leaned across the counter to buy her Marlboros at the Braxtonville Marathon.

What did you say?

Now, don't you think for a moment that Ann started nattering about it. Steve Oberlin was her brother, for one, and she and Doll Oberlin loved each other more than most sisters. Besides, Ann never did say a slant thing about anyone so far as I know, even if she did like to knead the dough with the other girls at PTA meetings. But everyone does a little bit of that, and sometimes it works good, besides. I'll have you know it was Ann Ennaugh who whispered in the right places and got Roy and Diane Cooley going out together, and look how happy they are now, married with those three little angel daughters.

Well, no need to apologize. I can't blame you for thinking poorly: there's been a lot of bad air floating around about her, and I suppose it's just going to keep coming. People will hate

on that ordeal a lot longer than they'll be talking about good old Steve and his dingle dunking, that's for certain.

Come to think of it, that thing *began* with Steve and his kid's first-grade teacher. Some people say it all came to a head later, at that midget race on the last night of the fair. I suppose that old bitch Mrs. Lydia will tell anyone who cares to listen that it had been in the making for years, starting with the family genes; all those Oberlins are happy and horny and nice as puppies. But if I were a gambler I'd bet the ball started rolling that morning when Doll Oberlin packed a bag of underwear and threw it out with her husband on the late-spring lawn.

Because, you see, Ann Ennaugh drove up to Jericho from Braxtonville that evening with the makings for Doll Oberlin's favorite buffalo chicken dip, an extra-large bottle of vodka, and the fortitude to fix a family. So when someone says the road to hell is paved with good intentions, I can tell you in all confidence that they're talking about Highway 31.

1

Half an hour alone in the minivan was more than enough time to smoke a cigarette. Maybe even two or three.

Here was an art of it—windows cracked, a 22 oz. Pepsi slush in the cup holder, Dixie Chicks on the radio, and the black-dirt fields of Braxton County, Indiana, rolling by like bolts of cloth laid out to cut on a counter. Soon as Ann got into open country, she pulled out the pack she kept in the glove box for days like these, flickered her Bic lighter into full-fire, and touched the heat to the end of a cigarette until embers flushed. She inhaled the smoke, and an already good night got better. Highway 31 was the best place to see the sunset, too, with nothing to block the dome of Indiana sky but dark silhouettes of the Leonard Farms barns and grain silos on the horizon. And what a sunset! What a breeze! Days like these, Ann felt as if she could flick the old off herself the way cold ashes scattered outside the driver-side window, life and death bound up together in a strange little destruction.

Ann knew Alex knew she smoked cigarettes in the minivan, but he hadn't said anything yet and he probably never would, so long there wasn't a smell lingering around. And she wasn't about to leave one in here—not with Sam's soccer stuff scattered all over the trunk and, more often than not, his forgotten backpack shoved between the seats. The last thing Ann Ennaugh wanted was to send her son off to school smelling like old Marlboros, the way her dad had sent her and Steve off. That didn't do good for a kid.

It sucked enough to see the hurt in Sam's eyes when she came inside each night after her evening cigarette smelling like tar and tobacco; sometime last year he'd had the old "no drugs, booze, or smokes" talk in class and had come home convinced that his mother was about to lose a lung.

“But Mama, why don’t you just *stop*?”

“Some things you can’t quit, baby. And anyway, we’ve all gotta die someday.”

“*Die*?”

She’d hugged him tight against her, smelling the sweetness of his hair. “Not for years and years. By that time I’ll be so old, you’ll be asking me to check out.”

And Alex, later, when they’d crawled onto opposite sides of the mattress in their big, cold bedroom: “Anna, dear, you really should try to break the habit. For his sake, not mine.”

All she could’ve said, she just said, “I’ll think on it,” and rolled away from him.

Ann laughed now, gripping her hands around the steering wheel of her minivan and feeling the bumps on the road beneath her. Hell, she didn’t much think on it, though she did stop smoking in front of Sam at least, and that did well enough to appease Alex. No, some things you can’t quit. Some things you can’t quit because they remind you of sneaking off to the woods behind Jericho Elementary after school and lighting up with your girls in the sixth grade, choking in early-autumn air and stamping butts into rain-wet leaves. Some things you can’t quit because they make you think of smoke breaks in the back parking lot when you worked a register at the Greendale Wal-Mart, times when both your feet throbbed like blood had about been bursting from the toes. Some things you can’t quit because they’re settled into your bones and you wouldn’t know how to quit if you tried. Not that Alex could understand that.

In Ann’s minivan, Dixie Chicks sang Earl off the radio, and some tinny bro-country boy whined his way on. Ann cussed and stabbed at the controls until she found Reba McIntire on another station, pouring her heart out about living in a one-room, run-down shack on the outskirts of New Orleans.

“Oh, hell, yeah.” The volume knob spun up, pinched between three of Ann’s long, thin fingers. She took a long draw of her cigarette, blew the smoke in a plume out the window, and caroled out the chorus with the Red-Head Wonder: *“Here’s you’re one chance, Fancy, don’t let me down! Oh, here’s your one chance, Fancy, don’t let me down. Lord, forgive me for what I do, but if you want out, well it’s up to you! Now don’t let me down, hun, you’re mamma’s gonna move you uptown!”*

Old, good lyrics. Ann grinned and smashed her foot on the gas to pass a tractor, reveling in the hum of van’s engine and in the way that big-ass wooden cross on her rearview mirror swung in a panic. She glanced up at the tractor cab as her van blurred past: it was Corydon Leonard, too big for the John Deere, his shoulders hunched forward and his thick, unkempt beard drooping down onto the steering wheel. He perked up and scowled at her through his whiskers, and she grinned until the green machine vanished into her rearview mirror; and it almost made her guilty, how easy the depths of a perfect evening could have her forgetting that she was diving head-first into Steve and Doll’s shit-show.



Jericho, Indiana, sprawls out in the bottom of a river valley, so there's no way to get out of town without finding yourself at the foot of a hill. On the east side, past the alleys of rusting trailers, Mill Street and 3rd Street both bridge the Big Blue River and crawl up toward a plateau of flat farmland; keep driving east, and those same roads will have you knocking on the back door of Indianapolis in an hour or so. On the south side, Henry Street winds its way up through a streak or two of trees before latching onto some better asphalt, yellow stripes, and the official designation of Highway 12. North is the Kingston Pike, which will get you to Kingston and Highway 40 if you don't mind a couple nasty S-turns; most of the Jericho kids go to Kingston for schooling, especially since they closed down Jericho Elementary. West on Trunk Street sends you out into the real boonies of Braxton County—crumbling pioneer graveyards, hidden marijuana plots, and lonely gravel back roads where ghosts press handprints onto your car bumper if you linger long after midnight.

West on 7th Street is what gets you to the intersection of Highway 31. The intersection itself hasn't got much to announce it but for a blinking light hung epicenter between a square of four telephone poles. If you turn left at that intersection, you'll get to Highway 40; from there you can find trails to Indy, Richmond, Muncie, and even further on to Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland—on and on until the road stops somewhere in New Jersey, where you can hear waves and smell saltwater.

Turn right at that intersection, and Highway 31 takes you to Braxtonville. And for lots of folks, that's where the highway ends.

2

Ann could have told Doll that Steve would cheat on her. Ann could have told her that on the day the two got married.

And none of it was Doll's fault, either. It wasn't her fault she and those other Schumer women wrinkled up so early—Doll's four kids didn't help much—and it wasn't her fault Steve Oberlin went after new things the way some men go after Christ. Steve had always been like that, skipping through girls from third grade all the way to high school graduation, and mooning over each as if she were his first and last. Ann had laughed aloud when he'd announced his engagement to Doll Schumer one summer firefly night on the back porch of their dad's trailer, and she hadn't well and truly bought into the fact until she'd found herself throwing rice into Steve and Doll's faces outside Jericho First Methodist Church.

So, yes, Ann had figured on tonight's inevitability for years. But even all that time didn't help to set her stomach at ease when she saw the orange streetlights of Jericho, Indiana, flash on in the dewy spring twilight.

It was Friday, and there was only one place where Steve would be on a Friday night—the backroom of Orley's. Orley's was a gas station and grocery store extraordinaire and had for almost fifteen years now stood uncontested as the crown jewel of Jericho's Main Street. It had begun as a humble shack with a few simple gas pumps, but after the shack burnt down in the summer of 2012, old Dave Orley had used the insurance money to build himself a pole barn, which he stocked with a meat counter, a pizza oven, a chicken fryer, and isles of snacks and beer. Now it was the only thing new in Jericho. The light that shone on those gas pumps at night lit up the sky like a used car lot, its halo catching on every crooked edge and gaping window of the empty houses huddling in on either side.

Steve was friends with Dave Orley, so he had a lifetime pass to the poker game in the backroom of the store each Friday night. The stakes weren't high, so nobody ever got too pissed; mostly it was just an excuse for Jericho men to drink Budweiser and complain about their wives.

Ann pulled into Orley's parking lot and killed the engine, sliding the key into her pocket. For a moment, she sat alone in the hush of the minivan, breathing deeply before opening the driver-side door and emerging into the cool night air. Shorts pulled to her hips. Tank top flattened. Purse thrown over her shoulder. Ann ran a finger through her bangs, checked her reflection once in the minivan window, and, satisfied, set across the parking lot with long, decisive strides.

Ann stepped into Orley's through a cloud of fried-chicken fumes. Mrs. Warburn—the portly old woman who worked at Orley's every Friday night—sat behind the cash register, bent over a water-stained book of Sudoku. When Ann stopped in front of the register, the old woman scowled and looked up over the thick rims of her glasses.

“Anna Oberlin,” she rasped. “Imagine seeing you here tonight.”

“Imagine.” Ann shrugged and grinned. At only 32, she still believed in her ability to duck untoward comments with a shrug and a grin, and she had every reason to. Life would never catch up with her. Her shoulders had their sunspots, sure, but those were from summers of gardening and pool parties, and she grew into every discoloration with an earthy good humor. Motherhood became her so well that she outstripped any post-pregnancy sagging. Even the roughened voice of smoking only deepened her charm, adding an edge that matched finely with the way her eyes could shine after a dirty joke.

And Ann knew she looked good tonight, too. When the shorts and tank tops came out, she couldn't help but notice the roundness of her shoulders, the svelteness of her arms and legs. It was a silly vanity, but even some degree of silly vanity suited Ann Ennaugh.

The shrug and grin worked like it always did. Mrs. Warburn shook her head with a tired sigh, and her thin, papery finger stabbed toward the backroom door. She grunted noncommittally at Ann's thanks and returned to her water-stained Sudoku.

Unfazed by Mrs. Warburn's disdain, Ann navigated the maze of grocery shelves toward the backroom, and right around the tortilla chips, she began to hear Steve laughing behind the backroom door—that high, choppy laugh he always squeaked out in the middle of some witticism or another. A moment later, a rumble of deep guffaws answered him. The punch line had landed. Of course it did: like everything else in his life, Steve's jokes were always new.

It seemed a crying shame to break in on the fun, but the only way out was through. Ann squared her shoulders to the backroom door and rapped her knuckles twice on the cheap aluminum.

The laughter stopped instantly, replaced by the squeal of a pushed-back chair and the heavy trod of footsteps. The door opened a crack, just enough for a long, pockmarked nose to stick out through it. Ann could already smell the beer breath, even through that tiny crack.

“An' who's that?” a man's voice slurred. “Who's this?”

“Your worst nightmare.”

The man on the other side choked out a laugh. “Well, fuck me, that's Anna!” The door swung open, and the nose was suddenly a person—the round-cheeked mayor, Rich Truman.

“Fuck me!”

Ann smiled. “Ah, Rich, you know I'm a married woman.”

Rich threw back his head and hooted, hands laced across his big, shaking gut.

“Goddamn.” He called into the depths of the room, “Oberlin, it’s your little sister!”

And Steve: “Shit! Well get in here, sis!”

Rich stepped aside, and with his big belly out of the way, the backroom came into focus. In Rich’s belly’s defense, there wasn’t much to see. Ann had heard of closets bigger than Orley’s backroom, even though the boys had managed to shove six full-grown men in there, huddled around a cheap card table. To fight all the hot air, they’d plugged in three revolving fans, which didn’t seem to do much but hum and ruffle papers. The fluorescent light was hardly bright enough to see cards by, and everything smelled like old fried chicken grease, but there was beer and poker, and that was good enough.

Steve was sitting at the opposite end of the room, his elbows propped up on the table and a Bud Light cracked open near his left hand. He glowed like a daisy, the way he always did—cheeks flushed and sanguine against the color of his neon yellow tank top, dark hair and moustache well combed, blue eyes shining out from beneath a attractively sun-beat brow. The stacks of poker chips in front of him didn’t come up higher than two or three thick, and they looked pretty sorry compared to the Babel-towers of some of the other players, but he sat with the swagger of someone for whom failure is game. The five or so men sitting around him had all won more but looked far less happy than Steve looked while losing.

“You’re just in time,” he slurred at Ann as she walked into the room. “I’m about to win it all back.”

Ann always had patience for her brother; seeing him even now, she felt a blossom of warm and easy love open in her chest. She crossed her arms and laughed. “Now that I’d pay to see.”

His cheeks stretched into a broad beam, and he tapped on the top of the deck. “How ‘bout I deal you in, then?”

“And how do you think Alex would take to me gambling his money?”

A chorus of “fuck him!” and other such niceties rang out around the table; Alex Ennaugh was not the most popular man in Braxton County, even if he was one of the most prominent. Ann shrugged and grinned again, and it worked again, and the men, their attention deflected, broke up into separate conversations about fishing in Blue River and where who saw how big a buck.

“But, you know,” Ann said. She made eye contact with Steve. “I could go for a cigarette. Could you go for a cigarette?”

He shook his head and started shuffling cards. “I’m on a roll, can’t stop now!”

Ann snorted to herself and pulled a pack of Marlboros from her purse. She slid one out, pinching it between her fingers and eyeing it nonchalantly.

“I bet your wife could go for a cigarette,” she said.

Wife. The word rang through Orley’s backroom like a wedding bell. Steve sat straight up in his chair, nearly knocking over his beer. Ann saw some of the other men glance at him, and their voices went softer, but none deigned to cut into the subject she’d dropped on the chopping block.

“You know,” Steve said finally. “I am getting a little antsy.”

Ann put the Marlboro between her lips and nodded.

“I think,” she said around her cigarette, “we all need to come to an understanding.”



Here's something for you: I know factually that I saw Alexis the day she and Ann first saw each other. Ann told me later on. I think about it a lot these days, for one reason or another.

Same thing goes, here. You'll hear lots of people talking shit about Alexis, just like they talk shit about Ann; and God knows they'll talk worse shit about the two of them together. But it's all wrong. Now, I won't say that I'll moon over Alexis the way I did Ann, because Ann I knew from diapers and there's a certain sense of slow-growth pride you get that way, but I'll say that I know why it happened, the two of them. That's because Alexis is a damn good woman, even after everything.

Yeah, I met Alexis that same day Ann did. I met her early on, too, right after dawn; you can't say anything for sure these days, but I'll bet I was the first in Jericho to tell her so much as hi.

You know how I always go out walking in the morning? Well, that day I needed groceries, so I meandered toward Orley's, and because the library's out on over that way, I went ahead and grabbed my checked-out books to carry along with me. Come to think of it, that's the walk I learned about Doll and Steve's tussle: I ran into Mrs. Warburn at Orley's, and she gave me all news I was interested in and plenty that I wasn't. You get the best gossip on nice spring mornings like that; people tend to open up when the daffodils do.

Anyway, I leave Orley's with my smokes and Pepsis, and what should I see but a Prius parked across the street, right outside Frances Furlow Public Library. Folks around here don't drive stuff like that much, you know, so I figured then and there this was an out-of-towner, though I will say I thought whoever it was just meant to stop for a moment before driving on to Greensburg or the like.

So I walk along without giving it too much a think, but soon as you please, I notice that there's some woman standing outside the library door, pounding all over her phone and looking like a lost puppy. And I'm an old lady who likes to stick her nose where it doesn't belong, so I figured what better excuse to get in on the know than to help this gal out.

Now, I don't think you quite understand what Alexis was like back in those days; you see her around now and you see a lot of how Ann changed her, made her look a bit more like the folks from here. That morning I met her outside Frances Furlow, she was straight up unlike anyone I'd ever seen, and I've seen too many people. Shit, it made such an impression on me that I can even tell you what she was wearing: long coat, dress slacks, collared blouse; her hair was dark as a mineshaft then, and she had pulled back into a bun. When I came up behind her, she turned toward me and I'll be damned if she wasn't wearing a tie, long and rich and tight as everything else about her.

You could tell, looking at her. I know it's not nice to assume things about folks, but you really could tell.

I'm not a bigot like that fat-ass Mrs. Lydia, so none of it bothered me any. Hell, I'm so tired of seeing the same old boring people over and over again, I get excited about anything out of the ordinary. And Alexis Vronskaya was everything but ordinary.

As you do on a nice spring day, she and I started up a conversation. Turns out the library wasn't open yet, which didn't surprise me any, but she was trying hard not to get impatient. She'd started the drive from Bloomington at 4 a.m. that morning so she could be there when the library opened. That's when she told me about all her research she was doing for her PhD and such, because I couldn't see an IU-bred academic standing outside a podunk place like Frances

Furlow Public Library without asking questions. Right smart woman, that Alexis. Smart and ambitious. Not so ambitious now, but that morning you could see hunger written all over.

Turns out that Kitty Schumer, who used to work a librarian job back in those days, had overslept. Alexis and I hadn't stood there for more than a few minutes before Kitty came roaring in on her bicycle, red as the Devil himself and gasping out apologies. She ran up the steps to the library and unlocked the door before she even got a chance to catch her breath.

I handed off my library books to Kitty, because Lord knows these old knees have a hard time climbing that second set of steps up into the library, and I started on home without a thought. It isn't every day Jericho meets a stranger, but it's not so rare that I felt the need to sit on it much.

It's funny to think about now, how important Alexis ended up being. You can't hardly tell what matters and what doesn't when it happens. It's not until you get to be an old woman like me that you understand the way it all fits together, and even still I wonder if it all fits or if it's all just slowly breaking.

4

Frances Furlow Public Library had stood on Main Street Jericho for over 100 years before Kitty Schumer worked there, and it was bound to stand there for 100 years after. On a sunny day, the windows smiled, and the red brick exterior seemed to glow softly in the light. On a rainy day, or at night after the sun went down, Frances Furlow was always too quiet and too heavy, like a centenarian of a feeble body and of a mind gummed up by the knowledge of too many years.

Kitty Schumer didn't want to work at the library, and she didn't want to bike into work from her parents' place outside town, and she hadn't wanted to get up that morning. But here she was—working at the library, biking, and, worst of all, up.

The only good thing about her mornings was riding down that hill into Jericho; it's worth saying that the worst thing about her afternoons was always laboring her way up that hill out of Jericho, but Kitty could ignore the inescapable future when she turned off of her parents' road around 9:30 am and pedaled down the gradually-steepening pavement. She always found a moment of relief there, amidst the building speed and whistling wind: when the forests on either side of the road began to blur, everything looked less like Jericho, Indiana. The faster Kitty pedaled, the more she could convince herself of the attraction of the indiscernible world flying past and the more she could believe that the road beneath her actual went someplace special. But after the hill, everything always settled back down into trailer-trash Jericho, like the muck building at the bottom of Blue River.

This morning, though, not everything had settled back down into Jericho. Kitty realized this as soon as she and the strange woman stood alone inside of Frances Furlow Public Library.

At only 18 years old, Kitty relied almost exclusively on the mercy of others to navigate social situations; when patrons came to the library, she acted with the awkwardness that is

endemic—and indeed sometimes endearing—in 18-year-olds. Thanks to the sweetness of Kitty’s round face and a ruddy complexion, this ungainliness manifested itself appealingly enough in her that she achieved instant approval and sympathy from most people, even though she all but completely disliked and besieged herself for it. The dissonance between external validation and internal agony only caused Kitty to feel more awkward, which created a vicious cycle that she was convinced would vaporize her before she turned 21.

Standing in the silence of Frances Furlow’s foyer next to this strange woman with a tie, Kitty felt all this even more than normal.

“Sorry I’m late.” Her voice still hadn’t caught up to her breath yet. She turned behind to the library’s glass front door and flipped around the open sign, buying time for her lungs to stop working themselves to death. “My alarm didn’t go off this morning, and I was up so late last night...”

The woman said nothing, just stared up at the high ceiling of the old library’s foyer. She rubbed her hand on the wooden handrail beside the stairs.

“Do you ride your bike to work every day?” the woman asked. Her voice was strong, but not harsh.

“Yeah,” Kitty said. She cringed down at the carpet, which was ancient and spotted with dirt and dead bugs; it was her job to clean, but she hadn’t done it in a month. “Too poor to buy a car, you know.”

The woman shook her head. “Ride your bike if you can. That’s better for the environment.”

And then, as if she were the librarian, the woman marched up the stairs toward the second set of double doors that led into the main room of the library. Kitty, pressing her lips together

and feeling a claw of cold anxiety rise within her, trailed after her; she could smell a musky perfume in air in the woman's wake.

The main room of the library was simple: children and young adult books found a home in the south wing, and the north wing held adult fiction and nonfiction; between the wings was a small middle section that boasted only a few ancient computers, tubs of books for processing, and a circular wooden desk original to the library's construction in 1904. Kitty was used to Frances Furlow and considered it wholly unimpressive, but this woman actually stopped and stared upon entering the room, her hands wrapped around the strap of her satchel as if around the rigging of a sailboat winging toward the sublime blue of a ocean horizon.

Kitty had opened Frances Furlow so many times that the routine was thoughtless; this morning, though, she struggled to prop open the inside doors, spilled water as she tended the succulents on the windowsills, and nearly broke the curtains as she pulled them open to the sun. The woman watched her as she worked, her dark eyes penetrating but, again, not harsh.

"Are you the only librarian here?" she asked.

"The only librarian. The only social media manager." Kitty laughed uncomfortably as she wiped a finger across a dusty bookshelf. "The only janitor."

Silence. The silence in Frances Furlow always pounded with the secrets a century could tell. Kitty swallowed hard.

"And you get paid?" Kitty nodded. The woman smiled up at the library's ceiling, which was gleaming white and adorned with intricate geometric molding. "It's amazing this old building looks as good as it does. It's, what, a Carnegie library?"

Frances Furlow and Kitty went way back—her mother was a long-standing board member, and some of Kitty's earliest memories were of reading Nancy Drew on the old carpet in

the children's section—so she knew more about the establishment than anyone else her age. “No, actually. It's, uh...it was started by Quakers.”

A wooden filing cabinet of old Quaker genealogies, abolitionist documents, and meeting minutes stood just behind the woman in the library's north wing. Kitty glanced toward it. Is that what a woman like this would come to Frances Furlow for?

“So,” Kitty said, walking behind the antique wooden desk at the center of the small library. “What can I help you with, Miss...?”

“Vronskaya.” The woman ambled across the library's creaky wooden floor, smiling at the architecture with an intelligent look, as if she had already known that Frances Furlow was not a Carnegie library and had just asked the question as a test. “Call me Alexis. I get enough ‘Miss Vronskaya’ from my students.” Turning around and seeing what must have been obvious confusion on Kitty's face, she laughed. “It's a Russian name.”

Kitty laughed uncomfortably in return. “I was going to guess Polish.” She rubbed her neck, feeling a sticky sweat begin to spread across the skin. “My name's Kitty Schumer. I'm...I'm not sure about ‘Schumer.’”

“German.” Alexis walked up to a bookshelf and squinted her eyes at the books' spines, leaning forward with her hands held together behind her back. “There's lots of German ancestry in this area. The name means ‘shoe-maker.’”

Shoe-maker. There was something intimate and embarrassing about that, the fact that this absolute stranger knew something about Kitty's family that Kitty didn't. She pressed her lips together and stared down at the paper-strewn desktop, feeling heat rise to her face. “So, what brings you to Frances Furlow Public Library, Alexis?”

“Research.” Alexis plucked a thick book off the shelf with one hand and flipped through its pages. “Have you read this?”

She held up the cover to Kitty. *War and Peace*.

“Oh!” Kitty shook her head. “No, no.”

“You ought to.” A calm and unusually soft expression crossed her face. She traced her fingers across a page. “It’s about people, nothing scary. All the best things are.”

Kitty suddenly remembered that she had no obligation to talk to patrons about anything that wasn’t explicitly library business, and at that moment she considered old Russian novels to be anything but library business. This spared her the labor of a response. Not that Alexis seemed to mind: she continued to skim through *War and Peace*, tracing her fingertips along the acid-yellow pages the way...the way lovers trace their fingers on each other’s jawlines...

The sweat on Kitty’s neck burst flood-gate fury—*No, no, no! Not now! God, not now!*—and she slammed her attention to the top of the desk in front of her. Overdue books. Notes about a local historian’s project. Application slips for this summer’s reading program. Kitty threw herself into these things because not throwing herself into them meant something unbearable.

There was no reason to think about it—no reason to think about how horrified she was of Alexis Vronskaya.

“Research?” Kitty shuffled papers without aim, threw things into drawers where they didn’t belong—shuffled emotions and threw them where they didn’t belong. “What kind of research?”

The floorboards groaned. The smell of Alexis’s perfume—that dense and petrifying musk—intensified, and the outline of the dark bun, the dark eyes, and the long dark coat played at the edge of Kitty’s vision.

“I want,” Alexis said. Kitty could feel her attention boring into her skin. “To start with your archive of the Jericho newspaper—the *Trumpet*.”

“Okay.”

“Around the year 1963.”

“Gotcha.”

There was a pause. The outline of Alexis moved. Kitty felt a hand on her hand—a warm, soft, well-manicured hand.

Kitty looked up.

“You seem nervous,” Alexis said.

What to say? How to say it?

“You don’t need to be nervous. I’m just a PhD student. If my dissertation review board were in here...well, that would be a different story.”

And she laughed. She laughed with so much good nature and life that the old library seemed brand new for just a moment—during the highest chime of the gentle cadence.

Kitty smiled. She smiled an uncomfortable smile. And then she smiled an embarrassed smile. And then, by the end of it, she’d forgotten to think about what expression her face was making.

“You know.” Alexis pushed back a loose strand of hair back from her face. “I figured I’d be in here with some old church lady. I’m so glad I got a nice girl like you.”

No no no. No!

There was the driving sense of something going downward. Kitty, in a fit of terror and ecstasy, yanked it up to the surface again. And it spread over her like summer rain across chalky pavement, the air smelling like life.

YES.

“Well,” she said, not even knowing she was smiling, “let me see what I can do for you, Alexis.”

She stepped out from behind the old wood desk and, with a gesture, led the woman with the tie and the satchel and the penetrating eyes toward the crumbling collection of Jericho’s *Trumpet*.

Frances Furlow, with a hundred years of a hundred secrets, watched and knew with the understanding of someone who had lived a hundred deaths.



What can I say about Ann Ennaugh?

She and Steve were thick as thieves, first of all. They had to be. That father of theirs wasn't much more than a bum. Slower than molasses in December, Joe Oberlin; he worked on remodeling the bathroom in that trailer of theirs for the kids' entire childhood, and on the day Steve bought the property and burned the trailer down after Joe's death, the bathroom still didn't have tiling.

Joe was good-looking though, and nice like the whole Oberlin lot. He married a pretty girl from Greendale, some friend of a friend. I can't for the life of me remember what her name was, but she was something else. Lots of people said she was too good for Joe, or that he didn't treat her right, but that was all jealousy talking. You never saw a man cry the way Joe did at her funeral.

Yeah, she died. She died giving birth to Ann—some weird labor complication. It was real shit for all of them. Joe had a two-year-old and a newborn to raise up, and he did his best, but his best still had Steve and Ann in a world of hurts. It's not my place to talk about it, so I won't, but let's just say that Steve and Ann both spent most of their childhood taking care of themselves and their dad both. And you don't go through something like that with someone without getting close.

Whatever genes that girl from Greendale gave those two Oberlin kids must have been dynamite, though, because they were the exact opposite of their father. Steve started his own mowing business when he was ten. Ann, she was babysitting as soon as she grew up old enough for people to trust her with babies. In high school, Steve got mechanic work, and Ann did alterations for prom dresses and such. They were too busy to be book smart, but both of them

made honor roll plenty of times—Ann more than Steve; I heard tell once that she wanted to be an art teacher. Steve was a mite more popular than Ann in school, but she more than made due and had friends all over the area. And when graduation rolled around, turns out that Steve got accepted into a technical school in Indy, and Ann planned to enroll in classes at the community college in New Castle. Joe Oberlin was sure proud of both of them.

But then Ann met Alex Ennaugh the June after high school graduation, and they were married by August.

It's not my business to shit on Ann for the choices she made, not for any of it. God knows why people do things, so I'll leave the judging to Him. All I can tell for certain is that Ann never did take any college classes. She never did become an art teacher. She never did do anything but marry Alex Ennaugh, and he was a 37-year-old man. He'd already gotten his optometry practice set up in Braxtonville when they tied the knot; hell, he'd already become a deacon over at New Life Baptist.

And so here's Anna Oberlin, who spent her summers riding to bonfires in the back of a pickup truck, and she's marrying Alex Ennaugh, who already has his will written out. I can't help but wonder what went through her head. Did she think she was settling down? Or did she just settle?

She should have left. People like her should leave. Not because I don't want them here, not at all. It's just...this place isn't good for people like her.

Truth be told, I don't think this place is good for anybody, really. Not anymore.